

Imperialism and Revolution



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By Charles McKelvey

We are endeavoring to understand the reasons for the spectacular economic ascent of the United States from 1776 to 1968. In the last two programs, we have identified two factors. First, the lucrative trading relation of the farmers of the English colonies of North America with the slaveholders of the Caribbean islands, stimulating capital accumulation. Secondly, the conquest of the indigenous populations of North America and the war of aggression against the newly independent state of Mexico, enabling the USA to expand its territory to the Pacific Ocean by 1890.

Today, we look at a third factor, the development of slavery in the U.S. South. Generally, slavery does not promote the development of the region where the slave plantations are found. Economies that experience development are characterized by the diversity of products destined to both domestic and international markets, but slave plantations produce raw materials, such as sugar, cotton, or coffee, for export. Plantation economies have weak domestic markets, with limited capacity to buy goods, because slaves have virtually no purchasing power, and non-slave laborers experience downward pressure on their wages, because slaveholders rent out slaves for economic tasks, who thus become low-wage economic competition for free workers. The weak domestic market of plantation economies restrains industrial development, inasmuch as it has limited capacity to purchase industrial goods.

Slavery, therefore, produces the underdevelopment of the region. However, slavery stimulates the economic development of other regions, because the slaveholders must purchase food, animals, tools, and other goods for the operation of the plantations. Illustrating this we have already seen farmers in the English colonies in North America sell food products to the slaveholders of the Caribbean, thus experiencing capital accumulation.

Prior to 1800, slavery in the USA was confined to Virginia, where tobacco was produced and exported, and Charleston, where rice was produced and exported. However, the world-economy underwent a geographical and economic expansion during the nineteenth century, as a result of the British and French conquest of Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. From 1800 to 1860, responding to the expanding global market, the entire Southeastern region of the USA produced cotton, tobacco, and sugar for export, utilizing low-wage, primarily African, slave labor. Cotton, the principal raw material for textile production, was central to this expansion. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made possible the separation of seeds from fiber, thereby speeding up the process of export to the mills that manufactured cloth. By 1800, the cotton gin could be found throughout the South. During the next sixty years, there was a rapid geographical expansion and an explosion in the production and export of cotton. By 1860, cotton was cultivated throughout South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, as well as in parts of Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina, Texas and Florida. Although some white farmers cultivated cotton, black slavery and cotton were intertwined in the South. The number of slaves grew from less than 700,000 in 1790 to more than 2 million by 1830 and to nearly 4 million by 1860, and slaves constituted one-third of the population of the South.

The dynamics of expanding cotton production in the South created economic opportunities for merchants and farmers in the Northeastern United States, who had been accumulating capital through the Caribbean trade. During the period 1800 to 1860, they converted their capital into textile mills, purchasing relatively cheap cotton produced with slave labor. In addition, they developed industrial manufacturing, responding to the expanding market for agricultural equipment in the cotton producing South. With the slave South providing cheap cotton and a market for manufactured goods, it was facilitating the economic development of the Northeast. Although the Northeast did not develop slavery in a systemic form, it nonetheless benefitted from slavery, first through a trading relation with Caribbean slaveholders, and then through a more thorough trading relation with the U.S. South. The northeastern region of the USA benefitted economically from slavery more than the South itself.

When I was an undergraduate student at the Pennsylvania State University in the late 1960s, I had the custom of stopping by the table of the black student organization, in order to “rap,” as we used to say. On one occasion, one of the black students informed me that I had benefitted materially from the slavery that his grandparents had endured. I did not have any problem with accepting any social debt and obligation that I had inherited. But I just did not see the connection. I nodded in affirmation what he was saying, but in truth, I could not see any connection between me, the grandchild of Irish and Italian immigrants to the United States, and the slavery of his grandparents. Perhaps he, young like me, could not have formulated the connection either; perhaps he was repeating what he had heard in social movement discourses, which had made an intuitive sense to him.

I eventually was able to solve the riddle of the connection between my fellow students’ slave grandparents and the economic opportunities that my immigrant grandparents had. Once I understood, through the study of books on the political-economy of slavery, that the economic development of the USA was based on slavery, first, slavery in the Caribbean, and then, slavery in the U.S. South, it was easy enough to see the connection. It was evident that my Irish and Italian grandparents and parents had benefitted materially from the economic development of the USA.

It is not that my parents and grandparents ought to be castigated for this. It is merely that we have to understand the reasons why things are the way they are, if we are to act with political intelligence.

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that seeks a world more just, democratic, and sustainable.

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